

Transcription: Manuel Reyes, Jr.

Today is Tuesday, October 14th, 2014. Today I'm interviewing Mr. Manuel Reyes, Jr. My name is James Crabtree and we are the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. And sir, thank you for being here today and letting us interview you. It's an honor for us, and for your wife as well for joining us.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Thank you for having us.

Sir, the first question we always start off with in these interviews is please tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the military.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Well I was born in 1946 in a small town in West Texas called Bronte, Texas. I went to school there, elementary school, high school, and my parents were migrant workers up until about the age of 12. Then we finally settled down and the kids were able to go to school, and my daddy got a job. But other than that, that was all my formal schooling.

Did you grow up in West Texas?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: I grew up, I was born in Bronte and raised in Bronte, and I was living there when I got drafted.

And where is that near? What town?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: It's a small town on Highway 277 between San Angelo and Abilene.

OK, I know those places then.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Small enough to where the general population is about 1,000.

And growing up, you said you were drafted. Did you ever have any thoughts about going into the military? Was that a surprise when you got drafted?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: You know, as I was growing up I started out and wanted to be a Boy Scout because I saw some of my friends were in the Boy Scouts and they had little uniforms and the uniform I guess to boys, it's intriguing. So I joined the Boy Scouts because I wanted to wear a little uniform. And then as I graduated, the Vietnam War was going and just started, escalated, and I felt like sooner later, yeah, I would be, which I did – graduated in May of '66 and got drafted in October of '66.

So did you get an actual telegram or letter in the mail saying you've been drafted?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: No, I actually got a letter saying that I needed to report for a physical, induction physical. And I went to San Angelo, and from San Angelo they took me back to Abilene for an induction physical. Of course if you're able to breathe and fog a mirror, you passed, and they told me then, look, we'll give you four options. You can either go into the Army, the Navy, the Marines or the Air Force. Or you can take the fifth option, you can go home and if you don't get called within 30 days, you probably won't be called. I said well I'll

take the fifth option and go home for 30 days and just wait my time. 10 days later I got a letter you've been drafted.

How much time did you have after you got that letter before you had to report?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: 30 days.

What were your thoughts and your feelings at that point?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Well I was ready. I mean I was employed at the time, but one of our good friends, the president of the bank had asked my dad or told my dad that he would pay for my college education, because a lot of times in that time period, individuals were going to college to get a deferment.

Yeah, the student deferments.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: And he said I'll do the same thing for you. I'll borrow the money so you can go to school and not have to go into the military. But I knew my mom and my dad couldn't afford it and I didn't want them to take on the burden of a loan, and even though the individual told me look, he said I'll pay for everything for you to go to college and then when you graduate you can pay me back. And I felt like no, because if something happened, then my dad was going to be burdened with that loan, and I thought no, I'll just take my chances and go in the military. So I opted to go into it.

What did your parents think of you making that decision to go?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: They weren't happy about it but I guess in a way my dad felt like that was a decision that was left up to me and he would go with whatever, and he did tell me, he said look, whatever you decide, he said but I wish you'd take the offer of going to college versus doing this, but I said no, I couldn't do it.

So when you got drafted, then at that point did you still have a choice of what branch you wanted to go into or they told you this time --?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: No, once you get drafted they decide which service you go into.

And where did they send you to then?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: I went into the Army. So I went in -

Did they send you to San Antonio?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: No, I actually went to Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas. I went to basic at Fort Bliss.

What are your memories of basic training? What stands out to you about boot camp?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: It was different. It was a complete change of activities from day to day. I mean we got there and we arrived on I guess they were Greyhound buses because they had been chartered by the military. They took us out to a parade field and there was about 40 of us per

bus, and the initial thing we did when we got there, we drove out on the parade field and then we unloaded out there in the middle of the parade field and we started running and doing exercises. Now if you were in blue jeans and boots and shirt, that's what you exercise in. Some guys showed up in three piece suits and a vest and tie and they did the same thing. However you were dressed, that's how you started doing exercises. And we did that for two hours. And then when they finally took us in and started breaking us down to different barracks and told us that was going to be our living quarters, and then within an hour we went to what they called then was a mess hall to go eat. They ran us through and grab a plate, eat it.

You got your head shaved at some point, right?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Right after that. We went to eat first and then we went to get our head shaved, everybody. I had a friend of mine that had beautiful long hair, locks and everything, and I remember he says look, how do you want it sawed? He said well just cut it, clip it, just style.

He didn't understand.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: He didn't understand, and the style was skin tight and everybody gets the same thing, no different.

So in 1966, how many of those guys there with you were draftees do you think?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: I would say that 90 percent of the ones that were there when I showed up were drafted.

But the war was just kind of starting up, right?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: It started to escalate more and more.

So did you think at that point then you'd be going to Vietnam because you'd been drafted, or was that still something off in the distance for a lot of folks?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: No, we pretty well felt we were going to Vietnam because the rumor, the word was, be prepared to be sent to Vietnam. And some of the individuals that were coming back from Vietnam were already there at Fort Bliss. So we were talking to them about what it was like. But come to find out, I mean when they were there, it wasn't the Vietnam that was there when I went. It had changed. And of course the war had escalated more and more. But they told us that initially they said well look, you're going to finish basic here and then you're going to go to a secondary school. Whatever skill, whatever job classification you get, depends on which part of the country you go to. And so during that process of basic training, they asked what I wanted to do or what I was doing in civilian life, and I told them I was working for a utility company. There was a power plant there about 20 miles away from my home and I was a control room operator. So we were generating electricity for the company called West Texas Utilities. They said oh, you were working for a generation company. So you know about generators. I said well, a little bit. I mean this is a native 1 megawatt unit. And I'm just sitting there in the control room monitoring all the controls and the day-to-day operation of it. Well it sounds like you'd be a good guy to send to generator operator mechanic school. Exactly what is that? I didn't know. He said well, you're going to be working with generators, powering units to power whatever we need. I said well that's a small engine repair school up at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. I said well, sounds good to me, I mean whatever. And so after – but there was a group

of us wanted to sign up and we did sign up to go to Vietnam straight out of basic because it gave us an option. You can either go infantry right now, we'll sign you up and you can go straight to here and go to Vietnam, or you take the other choice and we go that-a-way.

What was the enticement to go into infantry and go right away? Were they going to let you out of your contract quicker?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: No, same time, two-year commitment, and it was just that we know you're 99 percent sure you're going to go to Vietnam, and you can go today or you can delay it a little bit and go to this school and then you'll go. We thought no, we want to go straight. And there at the end, they said no, they're not going to allow that anymore. You've got to go to secondary school. So I went to the generator operator mechanic school up at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and stayed up there for I think it was four months of school.

That's a pretty long school then. Because your basic training was two or three months?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: It was like 8 weeks.

So pretty short basic training, and then your follow-on school obviously much longer.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Right. And then from there, we signed up again because I met some different friends and we were going to that school, and they said well let's go ahead and sign up and go to Vietnam as soon as we get out of here. As soon as we graduate we'll go to Vietnam and get that tour over with, and he said sure, we can set that up. And graduated school in April of '67, and then when we got orders, we thought we were going to Vietnam straight from there, and I went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

OK, why did they send you to Fort Sill?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Fort Sill was a replacement company. It was just a holding staging area for all different MOS's or occupation skills. And as they needed you, that's when you got notified. So I actually went to school to be a generator operator mechanic, got up to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and my job initially when I first got there was to drive a little tractor and pull helicopters out of a hangar, pull 'em out on the flight line, secure 'em down in the morning, and then five o'clock in the afternoon I'd go back to work, get the tractor, pull the helicopters back in the hangar and secure the hangar. That was my job. And I thought man, that's simple enough. And then one morning they asked if anybody knew how to type. And I said sure, I know how to type. They said well we need a clerk in the battalion office. So I signed up and went to be a clerk. That was just 8 to 5, no extra duties, just regular 8 to 5 job Monday to Friday. And I thought man, that's great, that's what I wanted. And forget about going to Vietnam. And then there was five of us there in that battalion office that we rented a house off post and just lived off post and no extra duty, nothing. So man, this is going to be great.

How long did that last for?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: About 28 days, and then a friend of mine in another office called me and said hey, remember when you wanted to go to Vietnam? I said yeah. Forget about it, I don't want to volunteer no more. I don't want to do that. He said well, come up here short in a few days, you're going to get a 30-day leave, and you're going to Vietnam.

So he had seen some orders?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: He had seen the orders that had come down and had my name on it. He said well, you're going. I said OK, great enough. So I got my orders, got 30-day leave, came back home and stayed around and then I shipped out on October 25th.

Did you travel individually or did you travel with a group of other troops to go over to Vietnam?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: To go to Vietnam, no, they actually sent me an airline ticket and I flew from Dallas, I had a sister that was living in Dallas, have a sister there, she was living in Dallas at the time, so they had been down to be with the family together before I left, and I went back to Dallas and flew from Dallas to Travis Air Force Base in California, and then from there I went with a group straight to Vietnam from there.

What were your first impressions arriving in Vietnam?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: My first impression was when we got there, as we got over land looking out the windows, you could see craters, and we thought hmm, never had heard about volcanoes, that many volcanoes being around Vietnam. And then the pilot or somebody came on the PA and says gentlemen, if you look to the right or look to the left and see all those craters down there, they're not volcanoes, those are actually where explosive had hit. You get your mind set, you're in Vietnam, and so -

Where did you fly into?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: We flew into Tonsenut Air Force Base, way south Vietnam. And we got there and the first evening that we were there in country, we went, they fixed us up to go eat. We were setting there fixing to go into this tent to eat, and you could hear, we thought it was thunder because it was raining, and said man it's thundering, and one of the guys that had already been in country there, he said that's not thunder, that's explosives. That's ammo either incoming rounds or outgoing rounds. He says better get your head out of your ass and wake up. He said you're in a war zone now. And from that point on, different mentality hit. Oh my God, I've always wanted to be here, but I'm here now, now what? So it was I guess a frightening experience to go from not hearing explosives and stuff going off, firing back, taking artillery rounds in, and firing back, plus at the same time trying to keep your calm and composure. And too, try to realize now that hey, you're in a zone now where anything and everything you do depends on whether you're going to survive this thing or not. So it was a learning experience to be there. Stayed there two days and then they finally decided where I was going to be shipped to, and I went up north to a little town called Shulai, Vietnam, and it was south of Danang about 40 miles. Well, first I was assigned to the 1st Single Brigade, and that was the brigade that was there at the time that I got assigned to, and then within a month that brigade changed and it became the Americal Division. The Americal Division was there, General Westmoreland was our commander, and I actually worked, ran the generator that operated his offices and complex. The guys in our section, we were in charge of running his compound, keeping it maintained. Actually there was the Army, the Navy, the Marines, the Air Force on that same base at the time, and the Army had the most amount of personnel doing the generator operator. So we would help maintain the Air Force, the Marines, never got down to the Navy, even though we met the Navy guys and we often dealt, got parts, exchanged parts, what we needed from them, but mainly Air Force and the Marines and the Army stayed together. The Navy pretty well had their own supply. So I just got assigned there and fell into a section of there was like 7 of us there, and that's all we did, just maintain

generators. Of course the monsoon and the rain is real wet. The fuel all came in in 55-gallon drums. Well, it came in in the bigger bulk into a fuel dump, but from there the only way we could transport it was 55-gallon drums. And then you got ready to put one of those drums into service, it only had a 3-inch diameter cap on it, and the hose that we had was just like a half inch, so you threw that hose inside that 3-inch hole and then the rest of it was exposed unless you covered it up. Well, we covered it up, but 9 times out of 10 it wouldn't stay covered up. So there was always water running in and the contamination of the fuel also, and the condensation that would build up in those barrels when they were getting low. So evidently the generators always picked up water in the fuel so they would shut down. So I'd be running and you never knew what time of day, so we were always on 24-hour call. So as soon as one of them run out, hey look, send the guy up here, we got one down. Of course they had somebody there that could transfer the generators, because they were set up to where one goes down, the other one you just turn the other one on and it picks up power. But as soon as that one went down, they had to have somebody there to repair it and get it ready to go back online. So that was my job and we did that there on post for the longest. And life was exciting. We were right at the edge of the perimeter of what we called Charlie, the Vietnamese, and the good forces, the U.S. forces, and we were, anytime we were – our company area was right between Americal Division headquarters and the perimeter – so anytime we took incoming rounds, if they fell short, it fell in our company area. If they went long, they fell in the South China Sea. And they wouldn't, I'd come to go check the generators, always checking them, always changing them out, and doing maintenance on 'em, to find unexploded artillery rounds stuck in the ground. And I had some pictures at one time where the artillery rounds, and it was funny because some of those artillery rounds had U.S. information markings on them. They'd been stolen, confiscated, however they got commandeered, and got shot back at us. Well they were in the ground, or they were in 4-inch concrete sidewalks unexploded, but you could look at the markings on all of them, and all of them got serial numbers and the whole thing, all U.S. made. So those we just walked around, we took pictures of and walked around and left them there, and the EOD team, they came in and disposed of all that. So it was nine times out of ten, about every other night we took incoming rounds.

Did you have bunkers that you would go to on grounds?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: We had a bunker between tents, because when I first got there, all we lived in was in tents. We'd just roll up the sides to let the air come through, and rolled down the sides when the rains came, but we had bunker in between tents set up, and the side next to the bunker we always left rolled up. That way if we started taking in artillery, we'd just roll into the bunker through that side. And then maybe about five months, six months after I got there, they did away with the tent and they started building what we called a hooch, it was a little house with a tin roof and a screen around the walls. Well the screens were so set up that also if you start taking artillery rounds, you just dive through the screen and fall in the bunker instead of having to run out the door to come around, you could just dive through and go straight into the bunker. So bunkers were always there. They were close by. The siren that actually went off when we – anywhere on post, anywhere on that base, if any one particular area or any particular area started taking incoming rounds, there was a siren that went off throughout the base. We had a siren oh maybe about 100 yards from our tent. So we could hear it, without a doubt we could hear it. The holidays for Christmas in '67, you don't celebrate the holidays on the actual holiday. You can either do it before, two or three days before, or two or three days after, because they knew the Vietnamese knew Christmas was a holiday on December 25th. So that's when we're going to launch artillery because they're celebrating. So we would do it at different times. And it was fun because all the officers – I was enlisted – the officers enlisted at that point when we had a

holiday like that, nobody could wear a shirt and nobody could wear a hat. There was no rank. You could not see any rank between enlisted or officer, and we had a steak cookout, and there would be what we called jeep trailers, quartered in jeep trailers, full of beer, iced down, and you could go over and eat as much steak and as much beer as you wanted to. That was our holiday meal. The guys that I worked with, of course we had some that had to work during that timeframe, and it was just a pick of the draw as to who got off and who had to work. I happened to be off that day, and about four others, and we got to drinking and I told them, I said look, I'm just going to enjoy the day. I'm off, so tomorrow's another day and they said I got drunk. I said yeah, they says you could hardly walk back to the tent. I said well, OK, I'm glad you guys took care of me. They said ah, you ought to see the pictures we took when you were drunk. I said well I don't want to see the pictures. Just forget it, let's just go on. Well that morning about 2 o'clock in the morning, 3 o'clock in the morning, the siren went off down in the air base, and I heard it. I don't know how I heard it, but I heard it. So I got up and I woke everybody else up in the tent. I said hey, the siren went off down at the air base, get up. We need to get our butts in the bunker. And they said no, you're crazy, you're drunk. No, get up. And about that time, our siren went off. And then they realized that I wasn't kidding. And of course we all jumped in the bunker and they said well how did you hear it? I don't know how I heard it. They said you were drunk when we laid you down on your bunk. I said yeah, but guess what, I heard it. And I guess that was the closest our tent ever got hit with any shrapnel and I think I still have some shrapnel in one of my little boxes at the house where it went through, we had metal wall lockers. That was the biggest thing, if you had a metal wall locker, what war. And we had metal wall lockers and we had shrapnel went through, well it went through the tent and it went through everything else. But other than that, it wasn't bad duty.

Were you able to get letters from home pretty regularly?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: We did, the mail was pretty good service. They came out pretty good.

How long do you think it used to take you to get a letter? A couple of weeks, 10 days?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Sometimes it would take two weeks, sometimes it would take it looked like three weeks to get it. But it was pretty consistent. Up until the time the last, I guess the last five months that I was there, because I don't know if you heard of it, the Melei massacre, the captain that was in charge of that operation came to our battalion and asked for generator support. So he wanted to draw some generators from our company to take with him on that operation, and we told him we couldn't afford to give any of them up because we were supporting the Americal Division. I said we can't because this is their replacements. Anything goes down there, we've got to have this to have that. And soon after that, I got shipped out. We had field units out, our battalion had field units out, and we had to have a generator operator mechanic on site with them 24 hours a day. So the last seven months that I was in country, about six months, I stayed out on a hilltop, and it was just nothing, maybe 25 of us there on the hilltop, and one artillery gun there, and a regular relay site. And got there, we had been there maybe two months and I hadn't received any mail. Our mail was bagged but they wouldn't fly it out to us. So one day we were there and this general, and I don't remember the general, came in, flew in on a helicopter and he had a second lieutenant as an aide, and we were setting there cleaning our weapons and got to talking to us, and oh how's it going? Great, great. He said everything going good? Everything going good. Any complaints? And of course everybody had been told, you don't tell, you don't complain. I said well general, let me tell you. I have a complaint. And he says let me hear it, what is it? I said well I've been out here two months. They tell me I have mail back in my company area, but I can't seem to get it out here. And he called his little lieutenant over and he

says, get this man's name and unit. Let's get that mail out here. He said well, anything else? No sir, I don't believe so. I think that's it. He said you men are getting one hot meal a day, right? Everybody wants to say something but nobody says, and I said well, that's another issue then. What do you mean? We were getting one hot meal a day. Every outfit out here gets one hot meal a day. Well sir, we're not getting a hot meal, period. How long you been out here? Two months. How long has it been? I said I haven't had a hot meal since I got out here. Lieutenant, make a note. I want to see that battalion commander when I get in. And then he got the majority of the guys that were there and he said well what do you guys want? You want breakfast, lunch, or dinner hot? And everybody said let's go for breakfast. We'll get hot coffee and we'll get everything. So we said breakfast is what we want. And sure enough the next morning it started happening. But that night, the phone started ringing. Who is the individual that complained? Well, everybody pointed to me. I said well hell yeah. The man said we're supposed to be getting it and we're not getting it. I said why not speak up. And so we started getting a hot meal a day.

It sounds like the battalion commander wasn't taking care of his men.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: He wasn't taking care of us. He was taking care of himself I guess.

There weren't any repercussions for you were there?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: No, there weren't any repercussions because of that.

So you started getting a hot meal and you started getting mail, right?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Oh, we got our mail the next day. Our mail come in and I think I had like 37 letters and a couple of packages. I mean it was one big bunch that came in. There was always helicopter traffic from one point to the other. They always came in and brought us ammunition.

They didn't want to do their job.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: They always brought in fuel for the generators. But why not the mail? The mail didn't take that much room on the helicopter, I know that.

It's good for morale.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: So anyway we were there and made the best of it.

How long did you ultimately stay on that hilltop?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Six months.

And that whole time, was it every day just kind of blend together after a while, was it kind of the same routine each day?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Not really. We had one of those snipers that had a mortar tube initially that he was living underneath a bush or in some bushes. He'd come out, set up the little mortar tube, shoot around, then hide. And we were always trying to pinpoint, pinpoint, so and we ran across some individual that attacked our hillside. Our bathtub, our shower point was down below the

hill. There was a little pond of water down there and there was maybe, I think it was a foot deep. But had the leeches.

So you were on that hilltop with about 30 soldiers.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Yeah, about 25, 30 that was there. So we'd take turns. Half of us would go down there and take a shower and then we'd have to pull the leeches off each other. Then go back up.

I imagine you got to know the other soldiers you were serving with pretty well, with that small of a number -

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: With that small of a group, yes, you get to know people, but the thing about it was as their time came up for rotation back -

They'd rotate individually, right?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: They just rotated individually. It wasn't the whole group came in and replaced everybody that was there. As your time came up to leave country, that's when you got pulled out of there and a replacement came in for you.

So there was always a new guy coming in -

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Yeah, there was always a new guy coming in and you had to leave. And we were always what we called solibrade. We didn't have any alcohol or anything on the hill, but we just had a little get together and a cup of coffee as a little send-off, and said hey, I'm glad you're out of here. We'd make it nice.

Did the guys get superstitious about being close to their return date?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Of course, everybody gets superstitious. I mean the closer you get to 90-day time, I mean after a while you don't - initially when you first get there, me, myself and I, I'd wear my shell pop, my body armor, day in day out. I don't care how hot it was, I don't care how heavy it was. But my mentality was I'm going to survive and I'm going to get out of here and I'm not going to take any risks that are unnecessary. But then the longer you stay in country, I guess you get more lax, especially if you weren't in any hostile activity. You learned to relax a little bit. But then as you get to the last 90 days, or some people even look at it at 120 days. Of course everybody's got some kind of calendar and they're marking the days off and everything else. At that point you start looking at I'm going to wear my steel pop today and I'm going to wear my body armor and I'm going to carry an extra clip of ammo with me and whatever. And you're more cautious of your surroundings and everything else.

So you knew the day, the exact day.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Oh I knew the exact day. But I got malaria in May of '67 and went into the hospital for 23 days and almost got sent out of country because they couldn't determine the strain of malaria that I had and I was just about to be shipped out to Japan when they said oh, the finally found out which one I had and they gave me the right medication for it and fixed it. I was able to return.

Do you still ever have side effects from the malaria?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Still do. I get sweats, unusually sweat a lot, and for no reason at all just break out in a sweat. And sometimes I'll sweat on this arm and this one will be just as dry. Sometimes it's the other way around.

I've read that when you get malaria, you can have side effects years later just randomly.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Or I'll break out in a sweat in my face, my neck, everything is sweat, and my arms are dry. So it's just – so I got out of the malaria, went back to work, but when I got ready to ship out of country on my last few days, they sent me back down to Cameron Bay, that was the out processing station then for the country, and went down there for five days to out process to leave country and I was getting sick again. But I didn't want to tell anybody.

Sure, you wanted to go home.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: At that point I wanted to get on that big bird going back versus going back in the hospital in country, or getting sent somewhere else. So I was sick every day, but in the mornings, those last five days in the morning they'd say well, you get everybody out there and get in the formation and they said well this group here, you get in this truck, this group here you get in this truck...and we went out and worked. If it was picking up trash or whatever they needed, work detail. And well the thing was when they said this group gets in that truck and this one and this one, they wouldn't take a roll call of who got in what truck. So the first time that truck stopped, I would jump out of the truck and wouldn't even go on detail. I'd go hide. I'd go down to the USO set down there and drink soft drinks or water or whatever and then go eat, then come back to the USO and then just set there until about 5:00, and then at 5:00 I'd go back to my little hut that they had set up and I'd sleep. Next morning, the same thing. But I never – I didn't want to get, for them to find out that I was sick, and I didn't want to go – I said look, for some of the work detail that you're having people do, and I've been here all year long now and you want me to go do that again, I mean – so I'd go hide. Then finally the last day, why they send you there so early, I guess just for work detail for four days and then the actual day, the last day there, is they do actually process your paperwork and get you cleared to go back. So I said hey, well once I cleared, they said hey, you're ready to go back, you'll go the following morning. I got on the aircraft, sick again, but I didn't tell them. I just – 8 hours, of course back then they would fly into Seattle, Washington, and 8 hours before we landed into Seattle, I got so sick I couldn't set up in the seat in the aircraft. And when I got the fever, I was freezing. When I got the chills, I was sweating. So the stewardess on the aircraft fixed me a bed in the back seats where they were setting, and when I got cold, they'd throw blankets on me and cover me up. And when I got hot, they'd set there and fan me. Got into Seattle and they had an ambulance waiting and two guys came in with a stretcher and put me on the stretcher and took me straight to Madigan General Hospital in Seattle and they quarantined the whole plane, and I'm sure those guys were happy about it for 24 hours. But went into Madigan, stayed there I guess about 11 days until they said they had taken care of the malaria. Oh you'll never be – a lie, you do have a lot of effects though.

Then at that point did you get to come back home?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: At that point I had spent my two years in the service. I actually spent like two years and eight days because I had to stay at the hospital. Then they paid a ticket back to Dallas and then my sister picked me back in Dallas.

What was that like coming home after being gone for a few years and having been where you had been? Was that strange to come back? Or was it a good feeling to be back?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: It was a good feeling to be back because I knew then that I had been to war zone and back. I did what they asked me to do and came back. But it wasn't a good feeling because then at that time, a lot of the protesting – and even and I was telling her, even when I was in the hospital in Madigan General, you know we'd go to eat and they'd have chicken fried steak, they'd have fried chicken, they'd have there in the cafeteria and I'd hear some of the guys complaining and says man, chicken fried steak again today, or fried chicken today. Man, I'm getting sick and tired of fried chicken. I'm getting sick and tired of chicken fried steak. And I kept thinking, I said well, you ought to go out there and eat.

No hot meals for a couple of months.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: No hot meals for a couple of months. All you eat is little hot canned, open a little can of bread and it's molded. You can't throw it away. You just peel the mold off of it and you eat the rest. Little cans of little steak patties, and it may not smell the best, but guess what, that's food. And then you listen to these guys here stateside complaining because they got chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes and gravy and the whole thing served to you on a platter that when you finish, you don't even clean the plate. You just go put it over there in an area and they got somebody cleaning. Out there, we lived on our, share a pot. We'd open two or three cans of that stuff, put it in the pot, we'd stir it up and then we had little sterno fuel tabs that we lit up and that was our heat. So we lived out of that.

Definitely a different perspective.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Different perspective, right. I guess it angered me because you're out there doing what you need to do, and people here didn't appreciate it. So my thoughts of the war was totally different. They asked me to reenlist, to stay, but at one point when we were on a regular relay site taking incoming rounds, standing up on this hillside, at Camp Firepeck, and you asked the mailing commands why when they tell you too many civilians we can't take the risk of killing civilians, but we can stand here and dodge this incoming rounds? I can't understand it. No amount of money is going to get me to reenlist if this is the kind of war we're fighting that we got to get shot at and we've got to take casualties and we can't shoot back because we might create more casualties. And then Obdama toured attempt, I don't want nothing back. But I know we took casualties on our side, injuries, time and time again. It was to me, I think it was more of a political war. It was just for profit for somebody, pockets. We never went in there to fight the war to win. I think it's the same thing going on right now.

So when your time was up, then you said that was it, you'd done your tour.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: That was it. Don't ask me to volunteer to stay. Because I could stay in country for another year, and I think they offered like \$20,000 tax free and the whole, which \$20,000 back then was quite a bit of money, but I thought no, I wouldn't do it.

So you got out and did you come back to Texas at that point?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Got out and come back to Texas, stayed here and stayed out of the military for about four years, and then went to work for the Texas Army National Guard in Brownwood,

Texas, went to work for them full time. And from there I came to Austin to do schools at Camp Mabry.

What made you want to get back in four years later? This would've been about 1972 or so?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: It was 1973.

So Vietnam was still going on.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Still going on. Well actually in '74 I got back in the Guard but just on a weekend basis, like in the Army Reserve. So I did that and in '80 was when I finally, a friend of mine up in Coleman asked me if I'd take a job as a full time supply at the Army in Brownwood, and I said yeah, sure of course, I'll go back in on full time. Because then at that point I figured well, if I can do 20 years as a Reservist, at least I would get some kind of retirement out of it and do that. But I came to schools to Austin to do schools here at Camp Mabry and at Camp Swift, and got to meet some people here that worked at Camp Mabry and stuff, and I asked them, I said look, if you hear of a job opening, call me and let me know. I wanted to transfer in. So I did. In '83 I moved to Austin, transferred to Camp Mabry and retired here in 1996. I got my 20-year letter said I got 20 years good service, you got a good retirement.

That's great, and you retired as a Sergeant first class?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Right. I'm not a politician. The closer you get to the flag pole at Camp Mabry, the more politics, you got to play politics. Rank was there, but what I had to do to get the rank, wouldn't do it.

But I guess you look back on it though, you're proud of the service you did.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Oh yes, I'm proud of it without a doubt I'm proud of it. I lived through TET offensive. TET offensive was the Chinese New Year and I was on perimeter guard duty during that TET offensive, and we took a direct hit on an ammo dump and of course when it went up, it was a big mushroom. You see the mushroom with, well this wasn't quite that devastating, but it was nonetheless, this young kind from Bronte, from nowhere, to be setting out there and that explosion go off and that mushroom, we're setting there and I'm actually setting -

Oh you got pictures -

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: I'm actually setting in that bunker -

We're looking at a bunch of sandbags and some wood ties -

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: That's looking outside towards the no man's land and all we had was concertina wire in between us and them, and when that went off, I was setting on some ammunition boxes and we had a buddy, actually three of us in a bunker - one could sleep, two of us would have to stay awake. Well I had slept until midnight and at about a quarter to midnight they woke me up and I had just woken up and gotten up, and the other guy was just fixin' to lay down and go to sleep when that fuel dump got hit, and then well the after blast of that knocked us off our ammo camp.

That's a strong explosion, yeah.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: And so then we started taking all kinds of incoming fire and we stayed there. Normally our duty there, our assignment there was for like 12 hours. We'd come in at 6:00 and get off at 6:00 the next morning or 7:00, but at that point we stayed there for five days. We couldn't leave. They just brought us food out there and ammunition. And then about maybe five minutes, ten minutes after they hit the fuel dump, they hit an ammunition dump and the ammunition dump went up also in a big mushroom. So I guess I think of the guys that died. Stars and stripes, their time. You know, how you could shield the flack. The next morning – so it's just a lot of memories.

Do you keep in touch with any of the men you served with in Vietnam over the years?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: You know, no. I'll be honest with you. I've tried and I don't know, that's why I've always thought why. I've tried contacting them and making contact with them, and I guess some of them have different feelings. Some of them don't want to remember. They want to put that part of their lives behind them, and then I don't know. For the longest I wouldn't talk to anybody about anything. I was betting 43 years since I've gotten to this point and I almost didn't.

Well we appreciate you sharing pictures.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: That's the Americal Division headquarters underground. It's all underground.

And that's the big antenna array.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: That's their main antenna. Probably all this right in here, this shed, it was just a shed, a roof over the generators, because all the generators are underneath that shed, all the equipment, everything is underground, buried and everything, individuals out there. And because of the ventilation they had to be above ground.

Are these photos you took? These are great photos.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: This is a little community just outside of the gate where we lived, a little town called Hanton.

I can see people on bicycles, little motor scooters.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: That was the first time I ever took a ride on a truck outside our compound.

You took the pictures, too, and I can see the back of the truck in this photo.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Yeah, I actually took the pictures of this. I used to have about 2,000 of these. I had a friend of mine that worked, that was his job. He was a journalist and he had a camera shop, and he developed film.

Out there in the field?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Out there in the field, so he and I became real good friends and he said any time you want to develop film, come on over.

Wow, that's got to be kind of unique.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: But it was, it was a good experience because I could take the pictures during the day and then go develop my own film. I did all of these while I was learning. Like I said, I used to have about 2,000 pictures of them, but my ex-wife one day decided I needed to part with them and she threw them in the trash and burned them. I have these because I had these over at my mom and dad's house during that timeframe. So that was a good experience. We used to pay 50 cents for a baloney and cheese sandwich. The Air Force would fly in baloney and cheese sandwiches either Monday or Tuesday, one day of the week. We couldn't get any cheese and we couldn't get any baloney or anything made into a sandwich. All we had was the C-rations. That's all we got. So we found out the Air Force was flying in baloney and cheese sandwiches so we'd go in there on that day and we'd buy, and then only they would let us buy four per person, so we'd go down there and buy baloney and cheese sandwiches. But I did get to go to Sidney, Australia, for R&R.

OK, how long was that?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: It was a 7-day break. It was 114 degrees in Danang when I left, and it was 18 degrees in Sidney, Australia, when I got there. What they failed to tell me was that in July, their seasons are opposite. Like right now they're going into spring. Summertime is in December. And this friend of mine, the individual that I replaced, showed me some pictures of all the girls out there on the beach in Sidney. He said this is where you need to go and R&R. I said OK, man I'm going to sign up for it. He said but your chances of going to Sidney is going to be real slim. So I thought OK, but when I did sign up for R&R, they said no, Sidney was out of the question, it was booked, and Salt Lake, but one day, an individual, you had to have \$250 cash on hand to go to take the trip to Sidney or anywhere out of country because they felt like you needed some money to survive on for a week. This individual had gone and gambled and was trying to build up more money than what he had. Well he lost everything. When it came time to take his trip to go to Sidney, he couldn't do it because he didn't have any money. So and I was going to go to Thailand, so when they announced that if anybody wanted to go to Sidney, had the money and their shot cards were up to date, they could. So I lucked out. I had the money, I had my shot card up to date, and so I signed up and went on July the 17th. Well, I got out there and it was wintertime, sleet, snow, and there was a gas war going on, there was no taxis, but we had fun. You get more rest and more relaxation going and coming back than you do while you're there because you want to put in one year's worth – you want to do anything and everything as much as you can while you're there because you know when you go back where you're going back to.

I'm sure that had to weigh on your mind that you got to go back, it's a temporary break.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: I've always thought about going back to Sidney and I've always thought about going back to Vietnam, too, just to see it, because the country is beautiful. I mean it's lush, greenery and everything else, it was just the war going on. It was a good experience.

Yes sir. Well we really appreciate you and ma'am for coming in and sharing some of your memories with us because here at the Land Office, we have archives that go back to the 1700s. We have the original Registro that Stephen F. Austin kept of the Anglo settlers that came to Texas, and we have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received when he was killed at The Alamo, and so what we're doing with these interviews is we're adding these to that archive,

and our hope is that hundreds of years from now, people can listen to listen to an interview like this, read the transcript from it and maybe learn something from it. With that in mind, is there anything you'd want to say to somebody listening to this interview long after we're all gone?

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Not really, other than just it was a learning experience. It makes you realize and makes you appreciate what you have, and when you listen to somebody that talks about how they hate this and how they hate that, they don't realize how good they have it. I've seen some people out there in the grounds, they will go through our garbage to find something to eat.

Yeah, that puts it in perspective. Well sir and ma'am, on behalf of Commissioner Patterson who is also a Vietnam veteran, and everybody here at the Land Office, I want to just thank you all for coming in today.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Well thank you very much.

And in a couple of weeks, I've got your address here and in about a week or two we'll get this interview made on CD's and we'll send it to you so you've got that.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Well any of these pictures –

I'd love to get copies of those photos and we could put them online at some point ... again sir, thank you very much.

Manuel Reyes, Jr.: Thank you for your time.

[End of recording]